



## Istvan Szabo: Dreams of Memories

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Vinteuil is made ridiculous in the eyes of the world by the lesbian affair between his daughter and her music teacher; his works become the means to social advancement for the Verdurins, who offer performances that draw aristocrats who would otherwise never enter their home. The Baron de Charlus tries to form a homosexual liaison with Marcel by promising him wonderful material for a book from his lifetime of social and sexual intrigue, and the old ambassador who wouldn't introduce Marcel to the Duchesse de Guermantes tries to teach him what kind of books will make it in the upper-class literary game.

But although Marcel suffers the emotional and sexual impediments of the other Losey/Pinter "heroes," his ability to make art from his experience, like Vinteuil's music and Vermeer's painting, successfully transcends these competitive, destructive games. Marcel's final triumph is to make a work of art in which his own baffled vulnerability provides the greatest source of strength and value. Similarly, Losey and Pinter use the subject matter of bewilderment and power lust to build the unique collaboration from which has emerged these subtle and powerful works of film art.

#### NOTES

1. (Grove Press). Pinter wrote the screenplay with the collaboration of Losey and Barbara Bray, a BBC script editor and Proust scholar. No film of this screenplay yet exists, of course, as Losey have not been able to fund the project. Thus we cannot know how it will be shaped through Losey's visuals. However, many indications do exist, and we will draw on these as well as thematic and structural similarities to other Losey/Pinter works.
2. Tom Milne, *Losey on Losey* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1968), pp. 107-108.
3. Richard McDonald as quoted in *Isis* (Feb., 1964), p. 18.
4. Reginald Mills, in *Isis*, p. 24.
5. Dirk Bogarde, in *Isis*, pp. 29-30.
6. Joseph Losey, as quoted in "Joseph Losey and *The Servant*," Jacques Brumus, *Film* (number 38), p. 28.
7. Harold Pinter, in *Isis*, p. 18.
8. Harold Pinter as quoted by John Russell Taylor, "Accident," *Sight and Sound* (Autumn 1966), p. 183.
9. *The Proust Screenplay*, p. x.
10. *Losey on Losey*, p. 48.
11. Mel Gussow, "A Conversation (Pause): From an Interview with Harold Pinter," *Performing Arts*, VI, No. 6 (June 1972), 25-26.
12. *Losey on Losey*, pp. 118-119.
13. Few actual shots are indicated in the *Remembrance* screenplay, but in one scene the camera is directed to look down on Marcel as he bends over weeping after the death of Swann (although we are not sure this is the cause of his tears) as he earlier did at Balbec after drinking too much brandy because of his separation from his mother.
14. The program of the 1960 performance of *The Room* and *The Dumbwaiter*.
15. *The Proust Screenplay*, p. 41.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

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## Istvan Szabo: Dreams of Memories

"*Shall I carve on the tree 'I am here'  
or 'I was here'?*"

—Character, *Budapest Tales*

Istvan Szabo was born in 1939 into a Budapest family of doctors. As with many other Hungarians his age, memories of hunger and scavenging, bombing and hiding during the long siege of winter, 1944, provided the detonation point for later development. In 1956 Szabo began studying at the Academy of Theatre and Film Art and

received his diploma in 1961. He made two shorts as a member of the Bela Balazs Studio after his diploma work. His first feature film was *The Age of Daydreaming* in 1964, a story of his own generation and their discontent. It is burdened with French Nouvelle Vague influence to the point of cinéma-manqué rather than -vérité. Andras Balint plays himself—or rather the self-image of Szabo—as a young man whose desire to travel, need for friends, difficulties with the opposite sex, etc. are very reminiscent of the teamwork of Truffaut and

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Jean-Pierre Léaud. There is, in fact, a small tribute to Truffaut within the film: a girl dashes across the screen carrying a placard for a Truffaut film. Although *The Age of Daydreaming* remains a minimal interpretation of a black-and-white reality suffering under French influence, it establishes some of the recurring themes and imagery of Szabo's later films—image of the missing father, role of the inspirational woman who remains a dream, dreams themselves trying to realize themselves, persecution, the social role of the doctor, Hungarians going into and remaining in exile. Even if *The Age of Daydreaming* is more about film-making than any other film of Szabo, it has neither the psychological wit nor the historical components typical of his art. The four succeeding feature films record the emergence of Szabo as one of Europe's most important directors, prominent for the quality rather than quantity of his work.

In the two years until 1966, Istvan Szabo's own dreams became more integrated into patterns of history, and his style ripened into colorful, well-paced meditations on the frustrations of the common man. He says about this period: "At first we thought we would make films about ourselves, about our problems, by just taking a camera and collecting our lives on film. But that was just recording, and it wasn't enough. I wanted to interpret these experiences, give them meaning."<sup>1</sup>

In 1966 he made *Father* about a boy's search for his dead father. A warm, tolerant humor is immediately visible in this film which developed into a gentle irony over Szabo's next ten years (a humor hard to read between the subtitles). A young boy's fantasies about a heroic father lead to a chase scene on a motorcycle, over fences, around corners, dodging Nazis—possibly the result of Buster Keaton on an impressionable mind. A piece of *The Great Dictator* is cut into the film along with the corresponding newsreels in a sequence marking the boy's birthday celebration. The newsreels not only establish the fictive time within the film, but depict Budapest in the crucial years at the end of World War II, an image that haunts every Hungarian film. The footage from the end of the war establishes the type of atmosphere that fosters the heroic image of father as partisan fighter, or doctor saving lives in the rubble of Budapest. The father's watch and medi-



Szabo's *FATHER*.

cal bag are symbols integrated into the plot of *Father*: close-ups of them and camera shots from every angle gradually lend them a life of their own. As inherited objects, they trigger a child's fantasy; when he is old enough to wear them, they suffer the shocks and attacks he suffers, and his conscience prompts him to keep them in good repair. In a scene following newsreel footage of the 1956 uprising (Andras Balint plays the matured version of the young Tako), Tako discovers that his father's watch has been smashed in a surprise attack in the streets. He immediately rushes to repair it and comes back to pick it up the next day. The wife of the watchmaker doesn't know which watch Tako wants, so she allows him to sort through the pile by himself. The camera focuses on the confusion of watch faces, all telling a different time, then discards one face after another until the very watch that we have seen in two previous close-ups emerges from the bottom of the pile. The watch is not especially beautiful; it's a simple, useful watch, but Tako has individualized it in his mind. This becomes clear when the viewer realizes he doesn't know what to look for in that pile of very ordinary watches. The presence of so many repaired watches somehow universalizes this experience, and this scene is indeed the fulcrum between the fantasy of the father's image and the search for the historical human father.

Tako's alienation from other boys with fathers is carefully established in group shots where Tako barely fits into the frame. His need for recognition—for fitting in—drives him to find out exactly who the man was. In this search Szabo incorporates the tactics he learned from Nouvelle Vague film-makers with his own ingenious story-telling. Tako seeks out people who knew his father and

listens to their sometimes contradictory accounts of his father, the doctor. The camera searches along with him; in revealing wide-angle close-ups Tako interviews people who don't enjoy their memories of the war until the camera moves back in the satisfactory realism of half-shots. The psychological detail of Tako's obsessive search doesn't stop at the personal history of one boy's need. Szabo commented on the subject: "After the war, many fathers were dead. Not just one little boy sought out a father. Whole nations, countries, people created fathers, if they didn't have strong leaders. Stalin, Churchill, Roosevelt—people make fathers out of their leaders—or vice-versa?" So the newsreel footage at the opening of *Father*, announcing Roosevelt's death, is incorporated to prompt us to apply this story to historical processes.

Szabo's concern for history could not be considered political in the sense of providing a political perspective on Hungary. What he does show is how historical events and social convulsions affect individuals and how, in turn, his story is the abstraction of the repetitive individual stories. The ultimate generality makes an impressive ending for his next film, *Lovefilm*, in 1970. The love story is not the focus of the film, but the aim and dream, as a father was the goal in *Father*. Szabo investigates an impossible love, a love inextricably conjoined by the cruelties of war and its aftermath of social reforms. The maturing of childhood sweethearts is not, however, the subject of the film. What is a leitmotif in other films is the focus of this one—Hungarians in exile. An inseparable pair of children are severed by the escape and exile of Kata. It's a subjective story, told from Jancsi's point of view, once again portrayed by Andras Balint; Judith Halasz was the perfect star for 1970, sporty but wistful, blonde and blue-eyed, doll-faced but tough. In close-ups she is the child of Jancsi's memories, but when the camera dollies around her, she is the object of adult desire.

The problem of *Father* is the opening crux of *Lovefilm*. Jancsi has no father; Kata does, and in the opening scene he states that he held her somehow responsible for the death of his father. Nevertheless, she remains an eternally recurring dream of childhood love, escape, travel, continuity. Jancsi's opening words, "I still dream about her,"



LOVEFILM

begin a series of memories and reveries, interrupted at regular intervals by border controls and train conductors. Szabo's technique of repeating an actor's movement three times, like the stuck record of a memory, with possible fish-eye distortion or fast and slow motion, occurs in *Father* as the only memory the boy has of his father: a series of zooming motions as a man with dark-rimmed glasses closes in with arms spread to swoop him up. In *Lovefilm* this technique provides variations on a fantasy that balances between dream and memory. Kata, with beautiful bare arms, whirls around to greet him on a station platform—a memory or fantasy that needs investigation. Loving Kata from childhood has created a fascination with her as a woman, a woman to be rediscovered; this complex camera work of Kata spinning happily on the platform prompts memories and metaphorically separates the Kata he loves from the Kata whom he cannot possibly have. And as his hopes fade, the camera comes to a stand-still.

LOVEFILM



A visit to Kata in Frejus is the backbone of the narrative structure. Flashbacks during the train trip provide a complete history of their common childhood, shared anxieties, and separation when Kata decided to flee. Her telephone call—filmed as a frontal challenge—begging Jancsi to come with her is twice repeated. Why she has fled or, for that matter, why he hasn't, remains unclear. Szabo treats such separations as historical inevitabilities. In his films, people are drawn out or forced out of their homes by Great Events over which they have little control, just as they have little control over their own impulses and obsessions. When Jancsi arrives in Frejus, expecting a swirling Kata on the platform, he is disappointed. In the bleached heat of southern France, another Hungarian in a dour dark suit meets him. The matter-of-fact reality of this world is depicted in faded or bleached light. The dominant color is a sweet turquoise in Kata's apartment, Jancsi's refuge, while the demands of her job occupy her time and her mind. She cannot sacrifice her career at the demand of love. This is the West, Capitalism, and another of the contrasts drawn in this film.

*Lovefilm* does not investigate the causes for emigration out of Hungary, but draws a very accurate portrait of a weeping, displaced bourgeoisie, intermingling, intermarrying but never thoroughly absorbed. The fact that Jancsi remains in his own country seems thoroughly accidental—a human and political error. In one scene, his parents bawl out, in frustration: "Where? We had no place to go." Szabo is very interested in how people then cope with such inadvertent or indirect decisions. In conversation, he said:

Political? What is political? I don't create ideologically. And I don't want to tell people how to think or what to see. If we look always at the political side, we forget the human side. A man is more than a political creature. His passions are more interesting to me than shooting films about economics and historical data. That's why I'm so happy when somebody talks about the pictures and the colors once in a while. In *Lovefilm* Kata wants to be with this man whom she has always loved, but there is a distance between them by virtue of this border or many borders that makes their desires impossible.

In *Lovefilm*, Jancsi is as much bound to the world of Budapest by his childhood horrors as by his family ties. The scenes of shuffling the children

into an air-raid shelter, the empty lot where they skated as children, their persecution and accusation by the Young Pioneers identify the confining character of the city, but they are also identification marks for Jancsi. Kata's great influence on Andras has been to force him to defend what is his. As children, in the first scenes, she is intent upon taking his knapsack from him. Later when they are accused of being in love, she is rebellious enough to stand up to their persecutors in the Young Pioneers. Ultimately, her femme fatale quality could be fatal for a man like Jancsi, if her strength forced him to sever his ties to home, to abandon an identity derived from Budapest's as well as his own history. In an amusing scene on the beach, contemplating Kata's body, he formulates his problem in terms of a problem of perception: he can touch her body now, but it will not be real to him until he remembers it in familiar surroundings back in Budapest. That man is created by his society, rather than vice-versa, is a constant in Szabo's films. In fact, those who abandon their own social milieu, Hungary, abandon along with their heritage their consciousness.

Although Szabo cannot be accused of making nationalistic elegies or political tracts, his love for Budapest and his fellow Hungarians lends a lyrical quality to his films that takes us unaware and sweeps us into his optimistic mirror of mankind. In *Father* and in *Lovefilm*, we know the main characters in all their strengths and weaknesses. In the course of the films, their subtlety and their individuality is cast against a background of people with alien sensibilities, who seem to persecute them. In *Father* the boy imagines himself the object of the others' ridicule and persecuted by an impending stepfather; in *Lovefilm* the children are mercilessly teased to the point of persecution. It is the obsession of the Andras Balint character in each film that leads him into this paranoid state, not unjustly. For in his search for his father or concern for Kata, he is careless and is unable to relate to other people honestly. He fibs about his father as a child and refuses to identify himself, when he interviews his father's former colleagues in *Father*. In *Lovefilm*, the traces of irresponsibility are more amusing: Jancsi carelessly puts down his parade banner as he pursues Kata and returns to find it gone; he stays with Kata in Frejus so long that he has time

only for a minute's glimpse of Paris from the train station to fulfill his dream of seeing Paris. Szabo's typical ending is another humorous way that he alleviates the asocial or anti-social elements of his characters: the camera pulls back to reveal a number of other people doing the same thing. The last shot of *Father* begins with a close-up on Tako's mysterious little smile, then pulls back to reveal him standing before his father's grave, then further back to reveal a cemetery full of people celebrating a Hungarian holiday at the graves of their fathers.

Family continuity—responsibility to the dead and the living—is the strongest social bond in Szabo's first film. In his next, that bond is weakened by exile, flight, arbitrary borders. Jancsi remains in his home, despite the temptation to follow Kata, and her letters confessing her fortunes and misfortunes abroad seem to justify his decision, as they gradually fade to the postcard level. In the final scene, Andras poises his pen above a card, seemingly isolated in his need to communicate with Kata, then the camera begins to pan along the counter in the post-office, where a ragged row of Hungarians also search for the right words to write to their loved ones too far away to keep love alive.

*Father* and *Lovefilm* compose a duet on the development of a young man, a sort of *Bildungsroman* on how the individual fits into the jigsaw puzzle of his society. The next two films are free of lead actors and are about constellations within the group. In *25 Fireman's Street*, the house is the star; in *Budapest Tales*, the trolley car. *25 Fireman's Street* tells the tale of a house being demolished, and as the house crumbles, a century of Hungarian history unfolds. Szabo sketched his original conception of this intricate film:

One night, an entire household of people has the same dream, and in that night, they love each other, hate, betray, reconcile themselves. It is this common dream that unites them, although they have all always lived in the house. They are in the attic, the cellar; there are layers of people in this house and, on this one night, they come together for a universal dream, but the next morning, when they awaken, nobody can be sure that life is the same. Yet they all act as if everything is normal, and don't believe that all the others shared their dream.

Behind Szabo's statement, there seems to lie an additional need to air out socialism: first, to ex-

plore the social injustices that dogged Hungarian history, typified by the class struggle and the manipulation, if not oppression, of women; secondly, to explore the basis of the social contract; and thirdly, to portray history as a dream, or nightmare, come true.

This presence of occupying troops is felt throughout the film. The impression of invasion is established through small groups of soldiers repeatedly moving onto and then filling up the screen. The uniforms change, but the tactics remain the same, and we grow used to the visual pattern. In the way a lady speaks to her maid, in the way wealthy people hide their jewels, intending to use the rest for bargaining, we are led into the class consciousness of an era of materialism and social barriers. The political events seem to be side effects of a historical spiral in which psychological conflicts compel the political ones. Such a point of view is inevitable, if one examines the internal social effects of anti-Semitism during the Nazi era. But the change of uniforms signals a change of ideology, which remains unexplored. The soldiers are tools of political forces and are depersonalized in Szabo's film, so that they are merely catalysts in the psychological struggle of the people living at 25 Fireman's Street. According to the changing of the political guard, the banners above the door are changed. The continual alteration of colors at the entrance of the house is an ironic comment on the permutations within, recalling Marx's rejoinder to Hegel's observation that historical events will occur twice: "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." But the third and fourth time we see the banners exchanged, the banality of history repeating itself develops into a worn-out evil.

What interests Szabo is the human depth behind the bright colors on banners and flags. In *Lovefilm*, the black-and-white memories of youthful dashes for air-raid shelters stands in strong contrast to the bright color of Kata's reality in modern France. The girl's own facile and cute quality is a part of the stunning blue of her rooms. Szabo also talked about his use of color:

Do you know how long a film-maker spends on details of that nature? Color, shadow, decor? So, of course I'm pleased when somebody does actually talk about the pictures and the colors. Before making *Fireman's Street*, I studied Rembrandt's colors,

and before *Budapest Tales*, Breughel's. We talked about these things for days in preparation for the film. I sometimes think that in *Lovefilm* I made a mistake. The blue of the girl's room was too bright. Perhaps some subtlety was lost.

"Rembrandt's colors" give a muted and mysterious tone to *Fireman's Street*, which eases the eccentricity of the camera movements. The only scenes that are given full daylight are the awakening of the last morning, and the shots of the wrecking machinery hammering on the house. Modernity is always seen in bright daylight, bleached to a dazzling incomprehension, in Szabo's films. Particularly since this film begins at bed-time with all the anxieties that precede sleep and the dream discourse of the film, the chestnut, olive, and cobalt tones seem dark enough to be emerging from the past or the id or wherever dreams come from.

The opening sequence resembles documentary footage of mammoth machinery reducing a three-story building to smithereens. A voice tells us, "Tonight these people may leave this house," as the camera then introduces the inhabitants at bedtime. Two of the women are rather well-developed characters, one the object of persecu-

tion who tries to shield herself from pain; the other, a protector and shield who takes the misery of the persecuted upon herself. The former is the wife of a doctor, and by virtue of the family's established position, supposes that they will not be affected. Szabo establishes the wealth of their tradition in an extraordinary synchronic sequence like the dance of the generations. A frilly chorus of young girls prancing in ballet costume begins a family celebration—old and young, alive and dead, the future and the past. While waltzing, one attempts to warn another of the future; she is told that he is long since dead. And they continue the waltz into a scene of destitution, as the family empties the room of furniture in preparation to flee. The doctor's wife is then thoroughly humiliated in a concentration cellar, released, reunited with her husband, only to have him die. As she cries out against the family's later arguments that it's only natural that women marry, that women need men, that she will die lonely and bitter, she backs up helplessly against a wall until her body is framed by the family portraits. Their ceremonial stance is a mute, guilt-framed indictment against a widow's refusal to remarry, to lose another loved one and to suffer again. The

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camera circles around her, taking over the movement of the waltz and thus puts us in the point of view of the dancers. The power of the scene lies in our being forced to move around her and see her fear, while realizing it is our point of view that terrorizes her.

Her feelings of having suffered "enough" are counter-balanced by those of the all-suffering baker's wife, who hides people in her attic at the risk of her own life, while she maintains a bakery. During the war, she turns out loaves of bread almost as miraculously as Christ, only to have them confiscated and eventually to watch in shock as the bakery is socialized under a new regime. Only once does she object, as the camera shows her being squeezed by the people hiding above, around, and below her: "One more person and I'll never go to sleep." As her son prepares to leave, he complains about the ahistorical consciousness of these mere survivors at 25 Fireman's Street: "When it's all over, we will forget. We won't even dream about it." Szabo is convinced that events cannot be demolished. They do not yield to materialist solutions:

Later, one realizes that the roots of certain phenomena are deeper, certain attitudes are influenced by the experiences of long-past events, or by a large number of experiences, or their essence, and then one starts to search for the deeper layers of the personalities. The secrets of the individuals, the internal structure of the visible buildings, the depths of old wounds under the scars—and then one tries to paint a more personal and psychologically, perhaps more detailed portrait. Later one realizes that analysis, the precise picture of things and the effect on the individual cannot always be found in realistic acts, but much deeper, one realizes that historic and political events of 30 or 40 years earlier and personal traumas have an impact, and even today penetrate the dreams. The dreams influence the daylight mood, and thus the daylight decisions and acts.<sup>2</sup>

The end of the war nightmare is a sequence at first sympathetic to the occupier, a young German soldier who stands on the staircase, longing to go home to his mother. A Hungarian mother views him compassionately, a shot is heard and a cry, "The Russians are close," and the boy falls dead. This entails a 360° shot which then follows the mother back through the door of an apartment into a new era, but still part of the dream. The new socialism demands a delicate balance of grati-

tude for favors done during the war and revenge after it. Szabo reunites the characters in their need for each other's signatures, verifying that they had opposed the fascist regime. The saintly innocence of the baker woman is questioned: "Were you a partisan?" "No, I just hid a few people . . . ." The close-ups and tight framing in this sequence imparts a feeling of pressure and anxiety balancing between individual responsibility and guilt. Szabo is careful here to avoid every ideology and categorization in favor of the humanist standpoint, but an ironic scene with the housekeeper betrays the absurdity of this period of realignment. Every European house has its concierge or keeper who manages, guards and gossips about the inhabitants. Szabo makes it clear that it was the house's keeper who betrayed the house: an obese, leering dragon of a woman, the very image of malevolence in his other films as well. When she approaches the baker woman to witness to her anti-fascistic stance, she explains, "All those years I could have reported all those people in your attic, but I didn't." The camera moves in to focus on the signature. Szabo's indictment of such behavior has no political axe to grind; the act of betrayal seems to be politically irrelevant, and this point is made again in *Budapest Tales*, where historical factors are missing. Betrayal breaks the social contract implicit in the sharing of the address, 25 Fireman's St., and creates the worst nightmares of history. Significantly, the longest nightmare sequence in this film is the Jewish pogrom: amidst the humiliation of the prisoners' nakedness, a guard offers a pitiful apology, "Excuse me, Madame." And, as in all Szabo's films, the offense is forgiven, or perhaps simply forgotten in the chaos of historical haste.

In a crowd scene preceding the persecution sequence, a group of people sing an anthem: "Sins of future, sins of late, they have paid for . . ." The price of such "sins"—I think Szabo would rather call it human folly—is the surrealization of the social contract, i.e., people's hatred and fear of one another when the "ties that bind" begin to strangle. Hungarian history after World War II is a sketchy dream in this film, with a quality approaching the films of Cocteau or Buñuel. Illogical sequences can only be understood in terms of the iconography and conflicts previously depicted. The film's color tones change: high-key lighting



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and filler light banish the shadow, as a loss of privacy is also felt. The shadowy scene of entrusting precious possessions to trusty neighbors is repeated in a scene where the same persons are in reversed positions and in full daylight, implying that persecution proceeds in an institutionalized form under another banner. But these impersonalized forms of persecution fit into Szabo's *mutatis mutandis* theme, and he shows more patience in trying to show how they fit into his aesthetic humanism than he shows for Hungarians in exile. In the previous films, they themselves bewail their alienation; in *Fireman's Street* we see the "American Uncle" returning with gifts for all, breaking the atmosphere with his orange shirt and tins of sardines. His apparition is edited into a sequence of a tenants' meeting for the house. This double invasion of privacy drives a woman into panic. Up against the wall, surrounded by family photos, she lashes out, "Do you in America know what's going on here? We don't want your gifts. Don't send me any more packages. Or sardines!" The sardines recall the scene in prison when she divided one tin of sardines up among two dozen women and children. Hunger is a problem of the past. The past is the problem of the present, and she screams that all she wants is peace. That is also impossible: the next cut reveals a wedding ceremony that she had protested. The celebration is an explicit and ironic denial of personal freedom. The complexity of the individual's fate with the family is once again portrayed by intricate camera work and a style of editing impossible to capture in words.

With similar technical virtuosity, Szabo veils the meaning of the final sequence. Amid decrepit furniture in the courtyard of the house, a fanatically idealistic Andras Balint is stripping other people of their possessions and selling them to a secondhand dealer who greedily amasses the loot until the old tenants stand half-naked. Ultimately, the young man sells an old medical bag, a gesture bound to shock any fan of Istvan Szabo, since the medical bag is an important piece of his iconography, a sanctified heirloom of the young boy in *Father* and a synecdochal aspect of the indispensable healer. The final shot of the dream can only be interpreted in terms of these two motifs: simultaneous consumption and rejection of materialism. There sits an archaic figure surrounded



FIREMAN'S STREET: "Don't you know what's going on here?"

by paltry antiques, hungrily gobbling down a glass pane from one of them.

The old house is wrecked and removed, but the historical dream is not so easily destroyed. The only form in which historical and political realism is minimal is folklore. So it was in this form that Szabo cast his next film. *Budapest Tales* has been discounted, because it is misunderstood. Penelope Houston reviewed it from Cannes as unsatisfactory: "There's a temptation to force more specific interpretations than the film wants to yield. . . ."<sup>3</sup> In an interview Szabo defended his lyrical and symbolical development:

It is the merciless law of film-making that everything which is photographed is becoming realistic. Concrete, single reality makes generalization difficult, and leaves little space for the creative imagination of the audience. If you like: it is the hurdle and fence of all poetic polyphony. We have to overcome this basic contradiction which belongs to the nature of the film as a genre. . . . And when one tries to film the anguishing events, which are condensed in dreams, and occur again and again, and one feels that the message has not been expressed satisfactorily, lucidly, then one tries to de-robe it somehow, strip it from all detailed ornamentation, psychology and documentary proofs, and reveal life experiences. And if one is fond of these people, then one tries to find the justice of their presence in life, and to enfold it in such a manner that it should also mean the truth of the given period, nevertheless include it in the infinite process of human truth: namely, to authenticate their life.<sup>4</sup>

At a time when most abstractions in cinema are for structural purposes or laden with political overtones, it surprises us to be faced with a director's explicit claim to an abstract motivation and goal. The only signifying elements in the film are

the emotional and psychological conflicts, and at that level Szabo presents us with no absolute value system to judge the behavior that constitutes the "plot." This is not the age of allegory, and it is even more odd to find a director whose initial influence was the Nouvelle Vague turning to a medium formerly reserved for moralizing. But Szabo tries to refrain from moralizing. The advantages of this "Märchen" (the title in German) as a cinematic form are first, that the time reference is the future instead of the past, and secondly, the search for the meaning of community takes place in a vacuum without the complexities and ambiguities of a specific era. Consequently the human image and ethic is very idealized. The concerns of neorealism which film criticism has inherited are as falsely applied here as they would be in Greek tragedy.

Perhaps the right place to begin is with Istvan Szabo's iconography. It is evident in his work—especially in films as reduced as his short films are—that iconographic significance is attached to time-pieces, the doctor, and his bag, eyeglasses, and a tram or train car. None of these objects are peculiar to Szabo, but it is his ability to incorporate them so literally into the action that drives others on to the quest for significance.

The trolley car in *Budapest Tales* could be considered the star of a film whose plotless progression is a ritual of social reconstruction. The theme is also present in Miklos Jancsó's work: in the wake of social devastation, we witness the anarchy of psychologically and physically isolated individuals approaching one another tentatively. In their sense of loss and being lost, their emotions have the impact of being prototypes of human sorrow, joy, love, hate, loyalty and betrayal. Szabo proposes that fear is one of the most powerful binding agents of a group, for toward the end of the journey, after hanging together through thick and thin, it is still the recognition and confession of each man's fear that unites and overjoys them again.

When people emerge from hiding and find themselves in a state of nature, how do they build a social group? First of all, they find a vehicle for their baggage. Together they push the vehicle in the direction they are going. Simple enough to have the verity of a fable! All the reality is then invested in the experiences of the journey, which

the tram-tracks must determine. "Tracks lead somewhere," says one of the nameless characters—an assumption that immediately provides a goal at once so unknown and unlikely that their pushing seems little more than Sisyphus-labor in the initial scenes. Thoughts of Sisyphus never entirely disappear, but the task is transformed to a group endeavor and lightened by the unity of the motley group pushing the battered tram, by magic, it would seem. Szabo's magic, as ever in his films, is the combination of mutual need and the journey, which functions as the test of affection and self-knowledge. In *Father*, Tako's idea to seek testimony of his father's existence is triggered by a half-remembered town he passes through on a train. In *Lovefilm*, the entire past is staggered between the interruptions of train officials on the journey from Budapest to Frejus. In *Fireman's Street*, the journey is going on beyond the screen, making the constant flight and exile reflect the instability of Hungarian life: they protect each other's possessions without the guarantee of return. This motif can be easily explained as a standard trick of fiction, but this does not discredit Szabo's dramatic technique. In fact, by a slight variation in this traditional theme, Szabo fixes all significance of the journey onto the trolley and portrays it in such detail that in one sequence, its indispensable value is proved, when the passengers first abandon it, then return to dismantle and transport each piece, then reassemble it across the river. Without the trolley, their trek becomes a wandering instead of a journey. As the cameras moves down the center of the tracks, the characters gradually fall away from the path and collapse, to the left and right of the screen, thus severing our attention.

Szabo is not, however, featuring a Chaucerian pilgrimage as a tour de force for the psychological development of the characters. It is clear that their concentration is focused on the progress of the journey. When asked if the characters don't betray a somewhat brutal dedication to getting on their way, Szabo replied: "Yes, they do leave people behind or ignore their absence, or forget. But that is how people are when they are engaged in such a project. They can't afford to look back, to wail or mourn. They save their energy for the natural disasters and try to keep on in spite of the human disasters. Is that inhumane? Aren't there

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common efforts that transcend the personal?" The inner contradiction of the film could not be more precisely stated, but the film is more than a paradox, as the tram is more than a symbol. When scattered characters first seek refuge in the tram, they are just trying to get in out of the rain. An old man philosophizes, "Where is there security today?" "It's stopped," replies another, referring to the rain. Obviously, Beckett has had his influence on the dialogue, and Bergman on the images, but Szabo has carefully stamped all his images with a good-humored humanism that focuses on people's common needs instead of common enemies. The size of the group vacillates absurdly, according to the number or noise necessary for that particular objective.

It is this sort of absurdity that raises Szabo's last two films to a level of abstraction beyond anecdotal history. In fact, Hungarian history contributes no necessary or sufficient condition whatsoever for understanding *Budapest Tales*. European history is fraught with reconstruction attempts, and this film has reduced that attempt to its archetypal components: devastation, regrouping, fending off destructive acts of god and man, and the redemption of lost knowledge. When a civilization is devastated, so is its cultural knowledge and arts. As at the end of *Fahrenheit 451*, individuals embody products of human culture and their recital of this element of human knowledge is its only guarantee for survival. Szabo's camera work in such sequences also has an "instructive" effect, showing the pride of the individual in his knowledge and the reaction of the other members until they are shown united by this knowledge in a group shot. Such a scene occurs at the opening of *Budapest Tales*, when nobody knows what "depot" means. That's where the tracks lead, where all trams go, it's in the city, and it thus becomes their goal. Each individual contributes a bit of the definition in such scenes, or a single monologue provides information on how to rebuild the more complicated aspects of social life: how to care for a child on the occasion of twins being born in the tram; how to write a letter of request to a petty official; how and what to pack when running away from home. The last recital is a poetic reduction of a theme that motivated *Lovefilm* and *Fireman's Street*, this time focusing on the decision about what you need and



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can afford to carry. Memories may be too heavy.

Two of these recitals concern the tram itself: its color and number. Each individual suggests a number and its significance, so that our number system and its place in the history of ideas seem to be reestablished. The squabble is easily resolved by the number 1, nobody's favorite number, but a number whose wider application to their social unity and their sense of singularity in the world is immediately obvious. The sequence that determines the color yellow for the trolley also establishes the basis for the tragic love affair of the journey. Maya Komorowska plays a bespectacled beauty who falls in love with another intellectual, when they share an exchange of free-association over the color yellow.

Szabo's romanticism is once again evident in his poetic scenario of lovers' exchanges, but in *Budapest Tales*, private need affects social consequences and vice-versa. One man is driven from the group when he jams the brake, causing the tram to derail. The action remains unmotivated, but later he is taken captive and thrown inside the tram where the newborn twins are presented to him as his sons. His love affair was casually established within a larger group of lovers in an earlier sequence and here takes on explicit meaning as the "father" is repatriated. Another man is used as a scapegoat for having traded in "ripable" cloth. Following a dramatic accusatory scene of ripping shirts, he is driven away like an animal, and we learn later that for the sake of unity, the group had to release their anger on him. Szabo demonstrates all the paradoxes and social contradictions of group living, but his style neither questions the justice of such actions nor entertains an alternative. The individual sacrificed for social welfare finds its paradigm in the doctor. As in previous films, the doctor's need to help

others is not reciprocated. In fact, in *Budapest Tales* the brutality of his death—stretched and hung from a tree—belongs to the anarchy beyond the tram tracks in the forest, from which outlaws and brigands regularly emerge to threaten the group. The ritual nature of his death also functions as a sort of ritual investiture of prophecy in the character of Maya Komorowska. She runs into the wilderness to find him, when the man she had loved is crushed under the weight of the tram, as he attempts to hold a piece of missing track in place. The loss of this passionate love is compensated by her heightened sense of touch. The reflection on her cheek from a new coat of yellow paint on the tram tells her it is the wrong color—and not the true yellow which she had shared with her poet-lover. He was a man, they all admit, who knew all the colors.

There seems to be a rather utopian principle operating here, which dictates that individual sacrifice is not lost, but rather invested in the survival of the group. This is most clearly seen when the lover's sensitivity to light has been transferred to Komorowska's fifth sense, even though this event separates her from the others. After that, she appears in almost no group shot, and emerges only to correct the fore-knowledge offered by another character who purports to read palms.

By trying to resolve good and evil and explore the need of man for his fellow man, Szabo walks the tightrope intellectuality of the humanist.

I wanted to make a film so simple that anybody could understand—even a child. So I told a fable so simple and clear about human beings whose only need was to stay alive and together. An optimistic or pessimistic portrait of man? I don't consider myself a happy-ending optimist, but I don't believe that man is all bad. Look at the beautiful things man has created. And the suffering too, of course. But it's about an even break.

The humanist trend has softened the films from the socialist countries and rendered them more passionate, if not political. A statement like Szabo's, above, reflects the need of socialist-realist taught film-makers to communicate a message that is not elitist in form in a work of art that is not a formulaic reflection of socialist-realism orthodoxy, but nevertheless reflects its aims.<sup>5</sup> Szabo's choice of a genre equivalent to fable appears simple; but the choice is simpler than the results, for

it challenges a taste that has been oriented toward realism. All the necessary elements of legitimate socialist cinema are there—positive characters and struggle toward a common goal. Szabo's cinematic construction has been simplified since the flashbacks, atmospheric modulations with color, and camera maneuvers to correspond to historical complexity that he used in *Fireman's Street*. In *Budapest Tales* a constant flow of events comes to a carefully prepared conclusion.

If the central role of the trolley car disturbs us, we need to review the purpose of a fable. In ancient fables animals take the place of creatures whose essential traits are exaggerations of a certain human quality and whose psychological make-up we recognize as human. Their adventures are amusing by reason of paradox and convey a certain satirical comment on human nature and society. Szabo's characters have been chosen in the same way, and if they do not directly satirize social forms and the concept of progress, there is an ironic counterpoint to Szabo's imaginative tale of how Budapest got its yellow tram.

In the final sequence, the characters push the tram into the city at last. In the distance many trams emerge. As the visibility increases through fog, we see for other groups of refugees pushing trolleys. They are all yellow and numbered "1". This sudden realization of the universality of their predicament confuses the group we have been following. They disperse and disappear in the crowd, while we see their faces isolated and stymied by the crowded city. Thus Szabo pulls us back to reality, allowing the camera to wander as aimlessly as his characters. Such an end to the unified struggle suddenly questions its validity, and reminds us of one of the Beckettesque exchanges at the start of the journey. The poet sings a song to rouse them on their way: "We follow Heaven's will." "We're standing still," comments a character who realizes the tram is no longer moving.

Thus Szabo's characteristic ending doesn't have the reassuring quality it had in previous films, when the kaleidoscopic image allowed us to see many individuals suddenly united in the same activity. Other traits characteristic of Szabo films also have acquired an ambivalence in the abstract nature of this fable. The usual repetition of one

scene at different speeds from various angles as a motivating force is completely absent, except for the introductory sequence of newsreel clips of trolley cars in the hustle and bustle of city life. As introductory footage then, the newsreel clips establish a reality that is completely denied for the rest of the film first, by its fairy tale realism and, second, by the natural surroundings. The careful choice and mixture of color visible in previous films is limited to the yellow of the tram, whose color itself is given over to the characters as part of the film's action. When the tram is painted for a second time after surviving the fire, it emerges a putrid canary yellow. The action instructs us in the effect of color better than the director's own manipulation of our emotions through color.

Finally, Szabo's films have been essentially plotless. The action consists in psychological development of central characters toward a conscious or half-conscious goal, summed up in the oft-repeated line, "We live." His concern for psychological accuracy is not obsessed with metaphysical crises, as with Bergman. His characters are typical of modern Hungarians in the materialistic and social conflicts that have their source in the national political history which Szabo considers capricious, at best. Thus, the "objective forces at work in society" shape not only the innermost being of these individuals, but more specifically their guilt, their inability to live out their passions, and their instinct toward persecution. Because society is unkind to its creatures, artists like Szabo are determined to be kind. Stripped from any social context, the characters in *Budapest Tales*, in their state of nature, differ very little from those of *Fireman's Street*. Good and evil are portrayed in a symbiotic relationship that stymies and neutralizes social progress. In each of his films, Szabo considered the concept of community, with its aim of living together from the individual, the historical, and the goal-oriented point of view. And in each film, it is forces beyond the characters that keep them together or apart. Szabo's major concern remains the poignant pleasure of survival. In *Fireman's Street*, an outsider asks one of the inhabitants, "How can you live here?" and he replies, "Hat in hand." Amid Szabo's technical virtuosity a humble plea for humanity seems superhuman.

## FILMOGRAPHY (1961-1978)

- 1961 *Concert*. Diploma film.
- 1961 *Variations Upon a Theme*.
- 1963 *You*. Short feature. Cannes, 1963, Diploma; Tours, 1963, Grand Prix; San Francisco, 1963, "Best Short Fiction Subject."
- 1964 *The Age of Daydreaming*. Locarno, 1965, "Silver Sail."
- 1966 *Father*. Moscow, 1967, Main Prize.
- 1967 *Piety*. Documentary.
- 1970 *Lovefilm*. Venice, 1970.
- 1971 *Budapest. Why I Love It*. Series of short films; episode: DREAM ABOUT A HOUSE. Oberhausen, 1972, Main Prize.
- 1973 *25 Fireman's Street*. Locarno, 1974, Grand Prix, Prize of the Oecumenical Jury; Atlantia, 1974, "Best Film from Abroad."
- 1974 *Premiere*. TV play.
- 1976 *Budapest Tales*.
- 1976 *City Map*. Short Film.

## NOTES

1. Quotations from Istvan Szabo were recorded by the author during interviews in Berlin.
2. Quoted from a brochure distributed by Hungarofilm, Budapest, 1054 Báthori.
3. *Sight and Sound*, Summer, 1977, Report from Cannes.
4. Again from the brochure on *Budapest Tales*, note 2 above.
5. For the best discussion of the changes in socialist countries films, see Steven Kovacs, "Beyond Socialist Realism" *Sight and Sound*, Autumn, 1976.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

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